

**Post Incident Analysis
Offut Island / Hermit Island
One Pinned by a Dislodged Boulder
August 31, 2014**



View Looking South

Battalion Chief Tracy Coleman

BACKGROUND

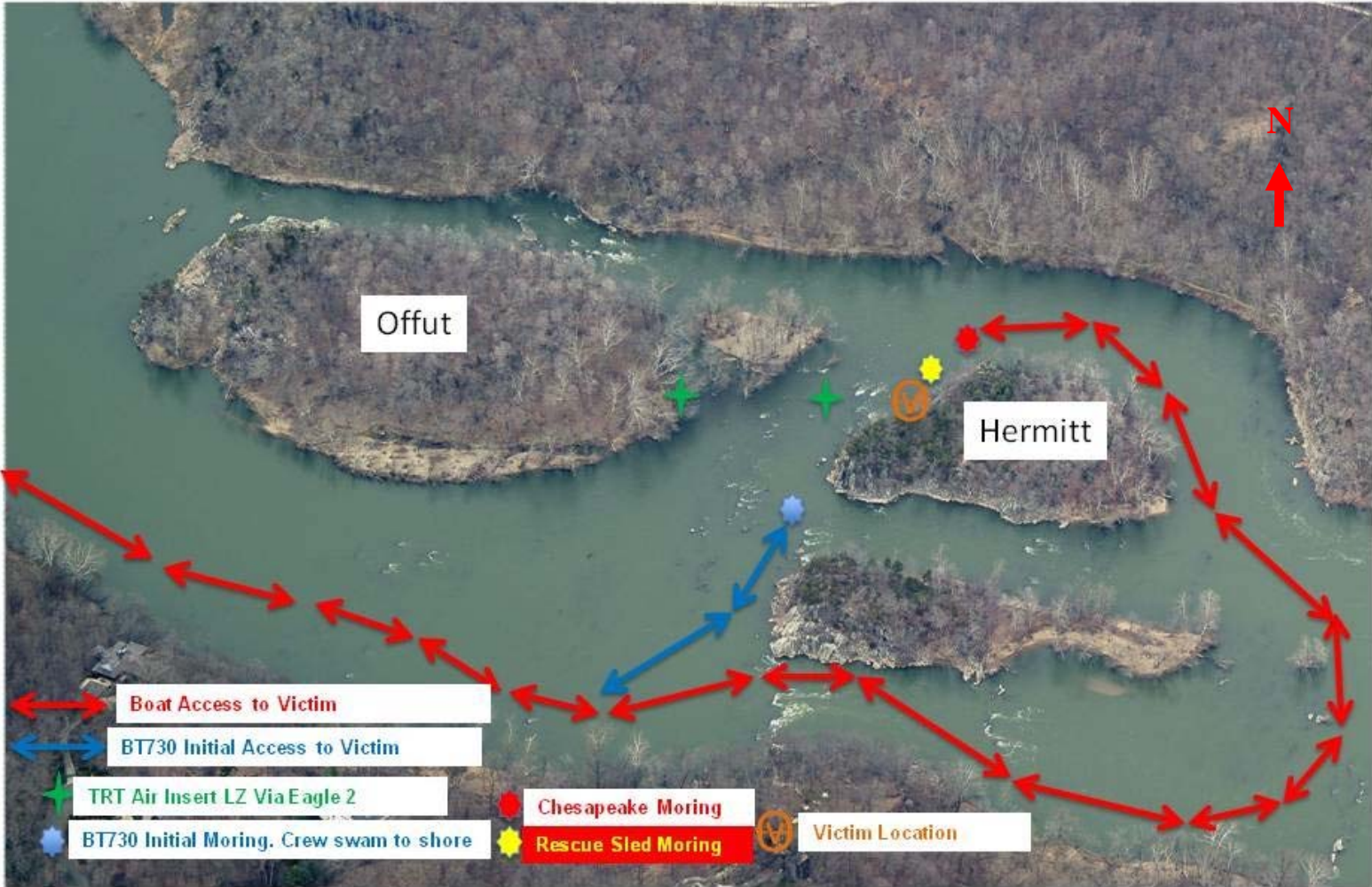
On August 31, 2014, at approximately 1639 hours, units were dispatched to the Potomac River for the swift water rescue downstream of Angler's Inn. Units dispatched were as follows:

Strike Team 730, Strike Team 710, Medic 730, Ambulance 711, Paramedic Engine 730, Battalion Chief 702, Helicopter Eagle 2, Rescue Squad 401 (additionally, the Technical Rescue Team were dispatched)

While en route, updated information was sent via MDC to units responding. The Boat Support units do not have a Mobile Data Computer; therefore, Battalion Chief 702 relayed information to those units via radio. Updated information was that the patient was pinned under a rock approximately 2' X 4' X 18', and that the patient was conscious and breathing. This information was gathered during the call takers phone conversation with the calling party, who was picnicking on the island and heard screams for help. After further requesting information, it was determined that the patient was on land and not in the water, and was believed to be located on Offut Island.

After the incident, a review of maps indicated the event had been on Hermit Island rather than Offut Island. The confusion was due to the crew's belief that Offut Island was where they were operating in the beginning; however, because of this belief, and to avoid any confusion, Offut Island was used throughout the incident and will be used through the remainder of this overview.

Strike Team 730 arrived on the scene and established Angler's Command. Strike Team 730 launched one boat from Angler's, as Strike Team 710 members and Battalion Chief 702 were arriving. Upon arrival, Battalion Chief 702 assumed the Angler's command.



Information provided from Helicopter Eagle 2 was that due to the low water level (2.8), Boats would have to come downstream on the Virginia side to Yellow Falls and cut across to the Maryland side and go upstream to the Maryland side of Offut Island. Strike Team 730 arrived at the patient who was located in a crevasse, approximately 40 feet from the waters edge and roughly 15-20 feet above the water level. The terrain was extremely rocky and difficult to negotiate. The patient was deemed to be a priority 4 upon arrival of Strike Team 730's crew. After viewing the scene and based on bystander information, crews determined that the victim climbed the rock formation ahead of another party to see if it was a safe climbing area. A rock dislodged from wall that the victim was standing on. When the rock gave way, the victim fell approximately 20 feet into the crevasse. Subsequently, another rock (determined later to be approximately 3,000 lbs) fell and landed on top of the victim.

The information that the victim was a priority 4 was attempted to be relayed to Command on radio talk group 7 Mike; however, radio difficulties prevented this transmission. Command contacted Strike Team 730 on radio talk group 7 Oscar and the message was relayed. At the time, Command was unable to secure the media and was unsure as to whether it was practical to announce to all units that it was a recovery operation. The Public Information Officer was en route to Angler's Inn and would later have media area set up there, so that they did not impede operations.

Strike Team 710's crew arrived at Angler's shortly after Strike Team 730 launched their boats, but were told by Strike Team 730 to wait for the arrival of Rescue Squad 401 before launching so that they could bring equipment needed to extricate the patient. Between both Strike Teams, there were 3 Technical Rescue Team members, of which, 1 was the Technical Rescue Team Leader for the shift. Based on the possible needs of equipment, they opted to call out the Technical Rescue Team for more equipment. Technical Rescue Team units were directed to Carderock Park and later to David Taylor Naval Surface Warfare Center, and were switched over to 7 Hotel as an alternate channel for that operation. Safety 700 managed radio talk group 7 Hotel for the duration of the incident. Crews on Offut Island were notified that the extrication effort would not start until the arrival of law enforcement to take pictures and work the scene from their perspective, so as not to disturb the scene. MCP personnel were taken to the Island by boat and conducted their investigation.

Command was made aware that an impending thunderstorm was approximately 30-45 minutes away and relayed this information to all units. Command was formulating a plan to account for the weather event and have crews from Offut Island report back to Angler's and wait out the storm so that the recovery operation plan could be set in place while waiting. Due to miscommunications between Command and Strike Team 730, this did not occur in time and Command was advised that crews on Offut Island would be able to shelter in place until the passing of the storm. All units on the scene were advised that operations would be suspended until the storm passed and personnel on the shore of Angler's were advised to take shelter in vehicles prior to storm arriving. The thunderstorm lasted approximately 1-1/2 hours.

During the storm, the Command Team developed a plan to break units into Groups and Divisions and develop incident objectives for the duration of the incident:

- **Offut Division** - for all crews on Offut Island.
- **Angler's Division** - responsible for all resources at Angler's and all logistics for the Boat crews taking equipment to the island.
- **EMS Group** - fell under the supervision of the Angler's Division. They were there to stand by for patients and for crew members.
- **Carderock Division** - Technical Rescue Team and support were based at Carderock, operated on 7 Hotel and supported personnel and equipment that was sent to the island.

The Command Team also had concerns that crews had been operating for the past 4 hours on the island and relief crews would have to be sent to the island to relieve personnel, in addition to an assistant safety officer to have a fresh perspective on the rescue. The weather was being monitored and we were aware that there would be a lull between the thunderstorm and another system would be approaching after the lull.

Also during the storm, Technical Rescue Team crews were formulating extrication plans for the victim. All Technical Rescue Team members present agreed on a series of progressive plans, working from low tech to high tech.

- **Plan A** - the use of a pinch bar as a lever and cribbing. Since there was limited space, there was no room to crib and crews went to Plan B.

- **Plan B** - to locate a high anchor point and lift with the come-a-long we obtained from RS401. Due to the risk of more rocks falling and safety of personnel, the crew decided on Plan C.
- **Plan C** - using Paratech Struts as a gantry to lift the rock with a come-along.

After the thunderstorm subsided, crews were directed to start operations again. At this time, a Montgomery County Police officer was transported over to Offut Island via Boat 710 to investigate the scene. After the investigation was complete, Technical Rescue Team crews began extrication using Plan C. This plan was successful and the extrication only took approximately 20 minutes.

As nightfall approached, Helicopter Eagle 2 was called back to the scene after refueling and waiting the storm out to set up for lighting on the river for crews to make their way back to the shore at Angler's. Unfortunately, a fog rolled in and limited the amount of time that Helicopter Eagle 2 was available to 10 minutes. Command realized that without Helicopter Eagle 2, additional people that were taken via helicopter to Offut Island would have to be brought back by boat, which created several trips to move personnel and equipment back to Angler's at the end of the incident. All personnel and equipment was brought back and the incident was declared over.

This was a multi-faceted incident and was complex because of the resources required, the remote location of the victim, and the adverse conditions encountered during the incident. The conditions were as follows:

- **Temperature** - Hot and humid at the beginning of the incident
- **Low water depth** (2.8)
- **Communications** - Radios were intermittently having difficulties until the arrival of the Communications Battalion Chief. Miscommunications between Command and Divisions
- **Access / Terrain** made it difficult to get rescuers to the work area.
- **Thunderstorm** - created a suspension of operations for a long period of time
- **Fog** - Prevented helicopter operations to assist with lighting and moving personnel to land.
- **Logistical** - a large number of personnel and equipment that was moved to Offut Island.

CONSIDERATIONS AND LEARNING TOOLS FOR FUTURE INCIDENTS

Based on information obtained from key positions in the incident and Command's perspective, there were a few areas of concern:

SAFETY:

Personal Floatation Devices

Personnel from the Technical Rescue Team were sent by Helicopter Eagle 2 to Offut Island without personal floatation devices (PFD's). Although crews were operating on land on the island, many crew members had to be dropped off in shallow water near the island. Anyone operating within 10' of water must be wearing a PFD. The other issue with this is that those personnel had to be taken back to Angler's via boat and there was a short supply of PFD's on hand.

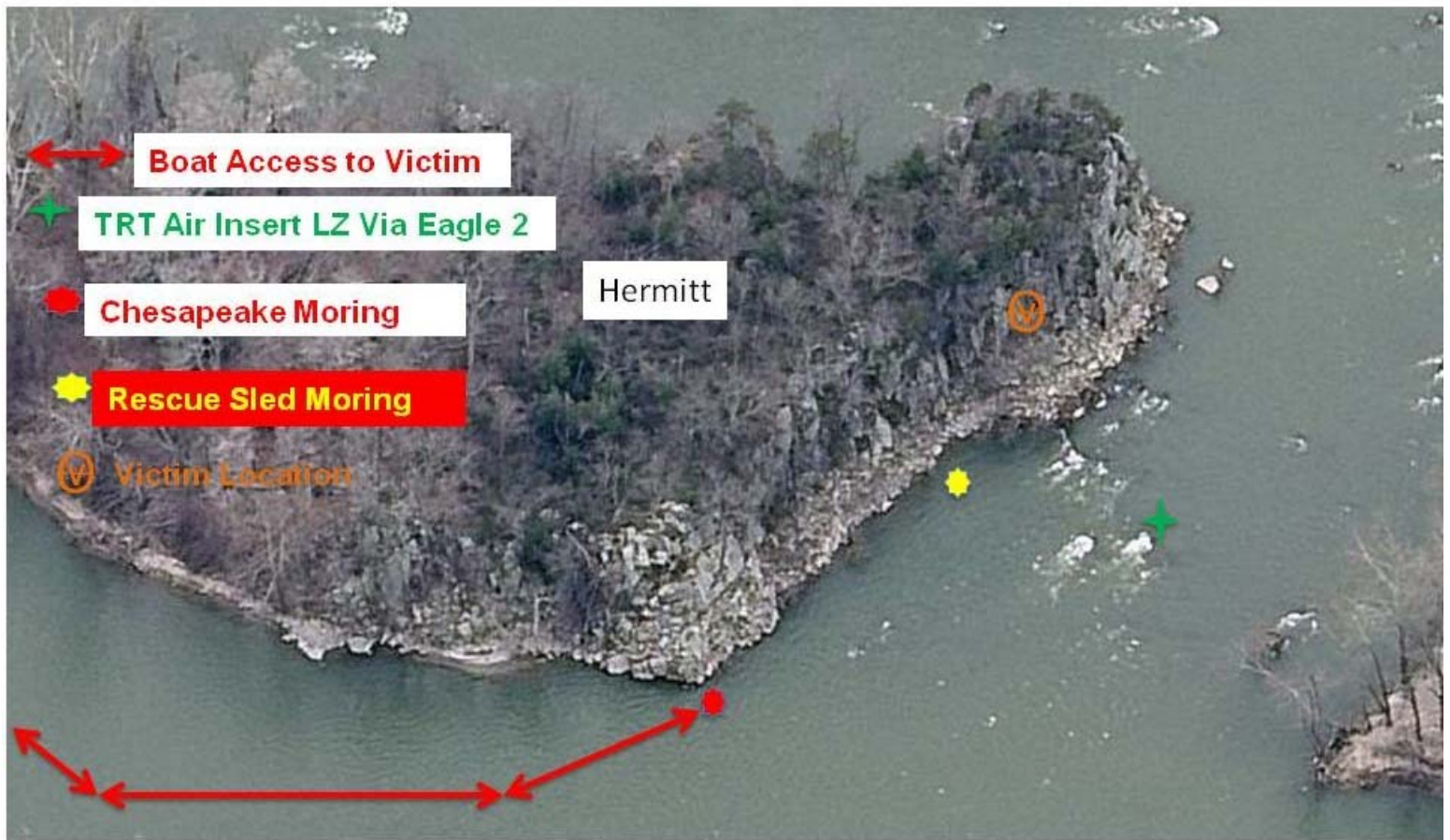
Boat Staffing

At one point, a boat went out with 1 boat operator and another person, with no certified crew member on board. Boats should never operate without certified minimum staffing (In this case, 1 operator and 1 crew member) It is the boat operator's responsibility to ensure that they have minimum staffing on board before putting into the water.

The initial boat went out with two operators and no crew members. It is unclear as to why this occurred, but should not be common practice when there are crew members available to staff boats. This potentially puts a boat out of service for lack of operators.

Equipment/Personnel sent to Offut Island

Too many resources were sent to Offut Island. Crews had a very limited area to work in and the terrain and slippery conditions could have resulted in injuries. As you can see, the area marked in yellow is marked as extremely rocky. Also, note the location of the victim in the cravasse, which turned out to be on Hermit Island and not Offut Island. Personnel in the Offut Division had been operating for well over 4 hours at this time and the Command Team was concerned that there was a need for relief crews. Command sent personnel to the island as relief crews and an additional safety officer to assist. Offut Division did state that they did not need any additional resources, but did not relay the conditions on the island clearly so that the Command Team would understand the constraints present.



Accountability

Accountability was a concern, as it is on every incident. A Personnel Accountability Report was conducted during this operation; however, it was difficult to know how many personnel were on the island after new crews were sent. Initially, it was determined that there were 8 people on the island and names were gathered by Command via telephone with Offut Division. Additionally, the fact that 3 personnel on the initial dispatch had two disciplines (Swift Water Rescue and Technical Rescue) created confusion. They responded as Swift Water Rescue personnel, and eventually were called Technical Rescue Team personnel. Once additional Technical Rescue Team personnel were transported, it was difficult to determine how many were taken to the island by boat and by helicopter. Some of this was a lack of information transfer amongst the Command Team, some of it was due to no information being requested by Command nor being provided to Command by the Division Supervisors. In the future, we should consider having an accountability officer or have the Angler's (or whatever launch site) Division handle the information of personnel going to an area and returning from an area to ensure that personnel are safe. In this situation, it would have been ideal if we were able to say that 3 personnel were leaving the launch site, and 3 personnel made it to the island, and so forth.

INFORMATION EXCHANGE AND RELAY

Technical Information Exchange

Command communicated to Offut Division, who relayed information to and from the subject matter experts (Technical Rescue Team) on the island regarding recovery operations and plans.

This created information loss, dilution of pertinent information, and confusion. Command should have been in direct contact with the Technical Rescue Team personnel for clarity of the situation and so that resources could efficiently be provided.

Communications

Aside from the typical radio issues presented, there was confusion between Command and the Offut Division regarding needs, direction from Command, and location of victim. The victim was actually located on Hermit Island. Offut Division did not want to create further confusion by changing the name of his Division; however, this information would have cleared up some confusion regarding jurisdiction for law enforcement and drop off of personnel.

Command did not relay to all personnel that we were operating in a recovery mode as stated above. This created confusion with personnel not committed to the island. It was later found that some personnel were unaware that the patient was a priority 4 and that the operational mode had changed. It is imperative that Command relay such important information to all personnel on the scene so that all are operating on the same page.

Jurisdictional Confusion

MCFRS should become familiar with law enforcement jurisdiction along the river. It was later found that Hermit Island is US Park Police jurisdiction and Offut Island is Montgomery County Police jurisdiction. This could have prevented a delay in law enforcement sent to process the scene.

NOTE: Once a fatality has been confirmed, it changes the dynamics of the incident and the scene is also a law enforcement issue. Since the patient was on land, the scene needed to be turned over to law enforcement for the purposes of their investigation and then transferred back to fire rescue to continue the recovery operation. In this instance, the incident was accidental; however, until a determination is made, consider the possibility that incident scenes may be crime scenes. Someone should always remain with the victim to maintain a chain of custody until law enforcement turn the scene back over to fire rescue.

SCENE MANAGEMENT

Angler's boat ramp

Several command vehicles were at Angler's boat ramp and created a hindrance to moving boat trailers in that area. Aside from initial command vehicles, subsequent vehicles should be parked on the tow path either on the other side of the bridge or beyond the entrance to the boat ramp to allow support units and boat trailers better access.

Second Patient

The younger brother of the victim was brought to shore at Angler's boat ramp and was interviewed by Ambulance 711's crew and several other personnel. He was not treated (as a patient), but could have been transported. Consider transport for those directly affected by similar psychological trauma; most hospitals are prepared to treat similar patients and begin grief counseling. Ultimately, he was transported to his parent's home by law enforcement.

CONCLUSION

Despite the complexities that this incident presented, all personnel were very professional and used their specialties to make this a positive outcome in regard to the operation. Crews operated well together, and under adverse conditions. All agencies worked hard to mitigate the

situation within their area of expertise and aided each other when needed. The following areas should be noted as creating a positive impact on the incident:

- The technical extrication of the patient/victim took approximately 20 minutes. This is a short period of time considering the small area Technical Rescue Team had to work with and the adverse conditions they encountered. Technical Rescue Team came up with comprehensive and safe plans for extricating the victim.
- We were fortunate to have cross-trained personnel that were swift water and Technical Rescue Team qualified on the initial dispatch. They were able to come up with several plans based on experience.
- All equipment and personnel were transported to and from the island via boats or helicopter. Boat operators made many trips back and forth and were able to navigate low water levels with very few issues. Their skill and a frequent training proved to be beneficial.
- The Technical Rescue Team in the Carderock Division operated under a separate channel (7 Hotel), which allowed Command to talk to other divisions without a lot of radio traffic. Span of control was maintained by designations of divisions and groups.
- Helicopter Eagle 2 was a great help in determining victim location, directing boats in low water to the best route, moving personnel and equipment, and assisting with lighting.
- Rescue Squad 401's crew worked extensively supporting Angler's Division with logistical issues. Their equipment was used for the recovery.
- The Public Information Officer was able to keep the media at the top side of Angler's and away from the scene.
- Despite the rocky terrain, weather, and river level, there were no Fire Rescue injuries.
- Communications Battalion Chief responded to the scene along with Technical Rescue Team and had Emergency Communications Center do a patch between talk group 7 Golf and the VHF channels to bolster communications, which resolved the breaking-up of radios during the incident. He also provided additional portable radio batteries for personnel operating on Offut Island.

Successful incidents rely on training, knowledge, and teamwork. All of those components were used extensively on this incident. The information gleaned from the feedback will help MCFRS move forward